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THE RELIGIOUS IDEAS OF THE FIRST BOOK OF
MACCABEES.

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The First Book of Maccabees* is one of the best of Jewish historical writings, but seems at first sight to contain little that is of theological or religious interest. In fact, however, the religious attitude of the book is of very great significance in the history of Jewish religious thought,—the more so because the position it represents found little literary expression in proportion to the number, station and influence of those who occupied it. It represents the view of the world and of life that prevailed among the upper, ruling classes in the time of national independence and glory under the Maccabean princes. It is a history of the wars that ushered in that time, and of the rules of Judas, Jonathan and Simon, covering the period from 170 to 135 B. C. It was written by a warm adherent of the Hasmonean house, in other words by one of the Sadducean party, at a time when that party was still in the ascendancy, and even before it had come into that sharp collision with the Pharisees which made of each a party in the proper sense. The date of the book is possibly toward the end of the reign of John Hyrkanus (135—105 B. C.), but more probably soon after it (cf. 16: 23 f.); certainly before the Roman conquest of Judea (63 B. C.), for the Romans appear only as allies (ch. 8, and 12: 1–4); and probably before Pharisaic dominance under Alexandra (78–69 B. C.), for polemic is wholly wanting; hence the beginning of the first century before Christ may be fixed as the probable date of the book.

The Pharisees, getting their distinction as a party from

*See the Greek text in Fritzsche's edition (1871), translated by Prof. Bissell in his *Commentary on the Apocrypha* in the Schaff-Lange series; commentaries by Grimm (1853), and Rawlinson (*Speaker's Commentary*, 1888); and introductory discussions by Schürer (*History of the Jewish People in the Time of Jesus Christ*, § 32) and literature there cited.

their opposition to the ruling house, were already active and gaining influence among the people. But the fact that they finally prevailed, and that, in consequence, most of the surviving literature of the period is of a Pharisaic character, must not make us blind to the facts that for more than two generations the Sadducees were in the ascendant, that the Maccabean rule had the hearty support of the people, who gloried in it as bringing back the age of David and Solomon, and that the Sadducees no doubt set the fashion in matters of belief, the scribes and Pharisees only gradually gaining dominion over the common mind.

In the absence of a controversial interest the writer has kept in a remarkable degree, considering his race and age, an objective, historical tone, and his religious beliefs appear only incidentally. His standpoint is in general the same as that of the son of Sirach,* but there are some significant variations.

In Sirach the individual is the subject of main concern, though the national interest is not wholly wanting. But the tendency to the individualization of religion, which marks this later period of Judaism, was somewhat checked or modified by the Maccabean wars and the reestablishment of the nation under the Hasmonians. This revived the national feeling, and brought back the thought of God's dealings with the nation as a whole. Of an individual relation of man to God there is little trace in I. Maccabees. Religion to this writer meant faithfulness to law and custom, and devotion, even to the giving up of life, to the good of the nation. It was impossible, indeed, that the sense of personality, once awakened, should fail to assert itself, but it found satisfaction in heroic deeds for the nation, and in the fame of a great name thus achieved. We do not then, as in the earlier Sadducean writing, find a religion of the individual described quite independently of the national religion.

The religious ideas of our writer can perhaps best be arranged under the headings:—1. God. 2. Conduct. 3. Recompense. 4. The National Hope.

* See The Religious Ideas of the Book of Ecclesiasticus in the STUDENT for July and August, 1891.

I. GOD.

The religious reserve of the book is remarkable. There is a hesitation to ascribe to God any peculiar relation to an individual person or event. Valiant deeds are no longer ascribed, as in earlier Jewish writings, to God's intervention, nor is he praised for great victories, but the conqueror achieves his own success and earns glory for himself by his deeds. There is, to be sure, prayer before battle for the help of heaven (3: 44, 50-53, "How shall we be able to stand before them, except thou help us?" 4: 10, 30; 5: 31, 33; 7: 36-38, 40-42), and the issue of battle is put in the Lord's hands (3: 17-22 "It is easy for many to be given into the hands of a few; and with the God of heaven it is all one to save by many or by few. For victory in battle is not through the multitude of an army, but from heaven cometh the strength" cf. 1 Sam. 14: 6). But after victory it is not the fear of the Lord but the fear of Judas that is spread abroad, "and his name reached even the king; and every nation talked of the battles of Judas" (3: 25-26). We are constantly reminded of the Sadducean position as stated by Josephus: "The Sadducees take away fate, judging that it is nothing, and that human affairs are not ordered according to it, but all things are put upon ourselves, so that we ourselves are the causes of the good, and receive what is evil from our own thoughtlessness" (Ant. 13: 5, 9. cf. B. J. 2: 8, 14). This is a somewhat Hellenized statement of the fact that the Sadducees did not look for the hand of God in the ordering of individual lives and deeds. God is remote from life, as the name commonly used for him, "Heaven," would indicate (3: 18 f, 50, 60; 4: 24, 55, etc.). Heaven's will is indeed rather perfunctorily recognized (3: 60), but the miraculous intervention of God is never introduced even when in prayer an Old Testament instance of it is appealed to (7: 41 f.), or when the event is such as most strikingly to suggest it,—so the sudden paralysis and painful death of Alcimus just as he was beginning to pull down a wall of the temple (9: 55, 56); and Jonathan's victory in battle after all of his army except two men had fled (11: 69-79). God is, indeed, called the "Saviour of Israel" (4: 30 cf. v. 11), but quite the dominating note of

the book is that it was the Maccabean race "through whose hand salvation was given to Israel" (5: 62, cf. 3: 1-9; 9: 21f; 13: 3-6; 14: 25, 39; 16: 2,—Simon said, "I, and my brethren, and my father's house, have from our youth unto this day fought against the enemies of Israel; and things have prospered in our hands, so that we have delivered Israel oftentimes").

The writer of I. Maccabees believes in God, but it is not the thought of God that takes strongest hold of his mind and life.

II. CONDUCT.

The writer's heroes and models of virtue are the Maccabean warriors and rulers, and the conduct most praiseworthy and excellent is conduct most like theirs. To put oneself in jeopardy for the sake of resisting the enemies of the nation, maintaining the sanctuary and the law, and covering the nation with great glory, is the highest task for men (14: 29). By deeds of valor to achieve a present deliverance and glory for Israel, once again became the ideal of life, and it was perhaps better than the ideal of the scribes,—by deeds of ceremonial correctness to gain salvation and reward for themselves in the age to come. The Pharisee purposed to be altogether religious in thought and life. The Sadducee's ideal and aim was political. Nevertheless such religion as the Sadducee possessed had, it may well be, certain elements of wholesomeness and reality which the Pharisee missed.

For our writer then the prosperity and power of Israel were the matters of chief concern, and the best conduct was that which most served to secure this end. The law and customs of the nation must be zealously guarded. The prosperous and ruling class is always conservative of existing institutions. It is regarded as blameworthy even for heathen peoples to forsake the religion of their fathers (2: 19), much more should Israel keep its customs and ordinances sacred. It is in their defense that Mattathias and his sons first take arms (2: 1-26, cf. 3: 21, 29; 6: 59, etc.). There is no good in life if the sanctuary and glory of Israel are laid waste and profaned (2: 12, 13). It is better to die than to look upon the evils of the people and sanctuary (3: 59). Those who

wish to adopt heathen customs are transgressors and lawless, sinners, impious, haters of their nation (1: 11-15, 34, 43, 52; 2: 44; 9: 23, 73; 10: 14, 61; 11: 21, 25; 14: 14). Patriotism is the sum of virtues, and disloyalty is the sin of sins.

III. RECOMPENSE.

The demand for a just reward, here or hereafter, for service rendered, finds no expression in I. Maccabees. It was written in a time of prosperity, by one of the ruling class, so that the problem of the sufferings of the righteous did not press for solution. No rightening of life's account "at the last," such as Sirach teaches, is required or expected. The revival of national feeling partly accounts for this fact. It was enough that one die in honorable defense of his nation and its rights and customs. This, rather than long life and prosperity, was the fitting end of a righteous life. It was the end of the lives of the writer's heroes, Judas, Jonathan and Simon.

In Ecclesiasticus we found the desire for personal continuance satisfied by children and fame. In I. Maccabees little is said of the former, though Mattathias could feel comforted at death in leaving with his sons the work he had undertaken (2: 49 ff.), and Simon, in putting his sons in his place as old age came on (16: 2, 3). But it is in fame that the writer finds by far the most satisfying and indeed the only individual reward for deeds of virtue, and one of the strongest motives for their performance. If we are to trust our historian the love of glory was a motive hardly second to loyalty to the nation and its customs in the minds of Mattathias and his sons, though we may suspect that such personal ambition was fostered by the successes of the warrior brothers, and did not at first alloy their patriotism and religious devotion to the law (13: 3, 4; 14: 29). They did however get glory by their struggles and inspire the love of it in their countrymen, and so the historian puts such words as these into the mouth of the dying Mattathias:— "And now, my sons, be zealous for the law and give your lives for the covenant of our fathers. Remember our fathers, the works that they did in their generations, and ye shall receive great

glory and an eternal name" (2: 50 f.). "Be strong and be men in the law, for in it ye shall be glorified" (2: 64). The note is repeated again and again. Judas "made Jacob glad with his acts, and his memory shall be blessed forever He was renowned unto the utmost part of the earth" (3: 7, 9). When others heard of his success they said, "Let us also make ourselves a name" (3: 14; 5: 56 f.). In prospect of death Judas says, "Let us die manfully . . . and leave no stain upon our honor" (9: 10, and see further 3: 26; 5: 63 f.; 8: 12; 14: 10; 15: 9). Simon, the last of the brothers, built a great monument over the graves of his father and brothers, "and raised it aloft to the view," engraving it "for an eternal name" (13: 27-30); and when the people were impelled to express in some way their thanks to Simon and his sons, they decided upon tables of brass on which were written the great deeds of the family, and which were "set up within the compass of the sanctuary in a conspicuous place" (14: 25-49). No higher words could be pronounced over a valiant man than these: "He gave himself to save his people, and to lay up for himself an eternal name" (6: 44). This is the sort of immortality that the writer coveted, and it is clear that it is put in the place of any other. Death ends all (cf. 2: 62-63). Regard for the individual has turned aside from the religious to the military and political sphere, and there is here a reason why the Sadducee could persist in the denial of a future life in spite of the growing individual consciousness of the age.

IV. THE NATIONAL HOPE.

Here the writer's position is peculiarly instructive. We must bear in mind that he is recounting the very events by which, at their beginning, the Book of Daniel was inspired, events that led to a revival of the Messianic hope, and started the Apocalyptic movement. The older parts of the Book of Enoch probably appeared at about the time of our book. Yet there is here not the slightest trace of all this; and this fact is exceedingly instructive in regard to the conditions of the time. In Sirach's time men of a Sadducean tendency (before the party itself had arisen) still held to the

Messianic hope and gave it earnest expression, even if it did not form an important working element in life.* The reason for the change is not hard to find. The writer of I. Maccabees is a loyal and enthusiastic adherent of the Hasmonean ruling house. He could not wish for a new kingdom that should displace this. He could desire nothing better than such a reign as that of Simon, which he describes in language thoroughly Messianic in tone: "The land of Judah had quiet all the days of Simon (cf. Isa. 32: 17-18); he sought the good of his nation, and his authority and his honor pleased them always. . . . And he enlarged the bounds of his nation, and recovered the country. . . . And they tilled their ground in peace, and the earth gave her products, and the trees of the fields their fruit (cf. Amos 9: 13, 14; Ezek. 34: 27; Zech. 8: 12). Elders sat on the streets (cf. Zech. 8: 4, 5); all communed together of good things; and the young men put on honors and warlike apparel. . . . His honorable name was renowned unto the end of the earth (cf. Mic. 5: 4). He made peace in the land, and Israel rejoiced with great joy. And every man sat under his vine and his fig tree, and there was none to make them afraid (cf. Mic. 4: 4). And no one was left in the land to fight against them; and the kings were overthrown in those days (cf. Jer. 30: 8-11; 46: 25-28). And he strengthened all those of his people that were brought low; the law he searched out; and every despiser of the law and wicked one he took away. He glorified the sanctuary, and multiplied the vessels of the sanctuary"† (14: 4-16). One who was so well pleased with the present would not be eager to look for a better time. It was not among the prosperous and the powerful that the Messianic hope flourished but among those who felt the need of a change.

In the parting speech of Mattathias we read, "David through his piety possessed the throne of a kingdom for ever" (*eis aiōna aiōnos* "unto age of age," 2:57). Mattathias, if he had said this, might have meant by it to express the

* See THE STUDENT Aug. 1891, pp. 94 ff.

† These latter elements belong to the legalism of later Judaism and have their nearest parallel in the Pharisaic picture of Messiah in Psalms of Solomon 17: 25 ff.

Messianic hope. But for the narrator it stands simply as a citation of the promise to David (2 Sam. 7: 13-16; cf. Ps. 89: 3, 4, 20-37), and "forever," in the light of history, would mean only, "for a long time."

Our writer does indeed look for the coming of a prophet who shall instruct the people in matters of ceremony or government. The stones of the altar profaned by Antiochus Epiphanes are laid away in a fitting place on the temple mountain "until there should come a prophet to give answer concerning them" (4: 46); but it was not a king for whom he longs; for "until a trustworthy prophet should arise" it was the will of the Jews whom this man represents "that Simon should be their prince and high priest forever" (14: 14).

Now it was precisely this maintaining of the high priestly and especially of the princely position of the house of Simon that formed the distinguishing mark of the Sadducee. It was the rejection of these, and especially of the high-priestly rank, that constituted the Pharisees as a party. And it is precisely in this book that we find not only a true reflection of the old Sadducean position, but the clue that has led to the discovery in recent years of the historical beginnings and first character of the Pharisaic party.* The original character and relations of the two parties had been obscured by their later developments. The secret lay hidden in two allusions in I. Maccabees. One is in 2: 42, where we read that "there assembled unto him [Mattathias] a company of Asidæans, valiant men of Israel, every one who freely devoted himself to the law." The other is in 7: 12 ff. where these same Asidæans are the first among the sons of Israel to make peace with the enemies of Judas. Those who were at first distinguished by their devotion to the law, are now numbered by our author among the transgressors and ungodly of Israel. It is because they sustained the pretensions of the "godless Alcimus" to the high-priesthood. But as a matter of fact Alcimus was the lawful high-priest. So all is clear. The Asidæans, "the pious," a society within Judaism of those who were peculiarly zealous for the law, join the Mac-

* See Welhausen, *Die Pharisaen und die Sadducaen*, 1874; Schürer, *History of the Jewish People in the Time of Jesus Christ* § 26.

cabean brothers at first and fight for the existence of the religion of their fathers, but when religious freedom has been regained, the altar renewed, and Judas, not contented, goes on to fight no longer for the faith and the law, but for power and glory, the Asidæans withdraw and resist pretensions that conflicted with the law. Thus the zealous legalists of Judaism became a party, the Pharisees, by their opposition to the ruling house, and so made of the adherents of that house a party, the Sadducees. The Pharisees, then, were in essence a religious party. Their political activity and significance is accidental. They never entered politics except in defense of the law of Moses. The Sadducees, on the contrary, were essentially a political party, and would not enter upon religious discussion except to defend their political interests, or as a last excuse for being, after they had, under Roman rule, lost all distinctive political significance.